Public Administration's Identity Crisis and the Emerging Approach that May Alleviate It

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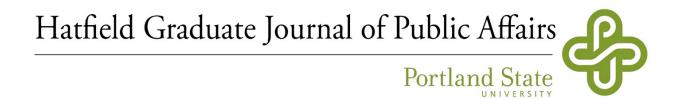Follow this and additional works at: https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/hgjpa

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Public Administration's Identity Crisis
And The Emerging Approach That May Alleviate It

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Abstract

The field of public administration is in the middle of a long-standing, self-imposed identity crisis. This is due in part to the acceptance of new perspectives in the field redefining the identity of the field; but for only as long as the perspective remains dominant. The near future of public administration holds another potential shift in the dominant perspective to that of an approach founded in the ideals of democratic and public values theory. This approach is supported by trends of increasing research and theory in the areas such as public participation and public service motivation. Continued research on these concepts suggests that the emerging approach will be legitimized within the field. The potential establishment of this alternative perspective in public administration provides an opportunity for public administration scholars to embrace a new perspective on the identity of public administration as one of changing nature, rather than continuing to place the entirety of public administration's identity in temporally-based dominant perspectives.

Background

Despite an extensive history of practice as old as human civilization, the study of public administration continues to suffer from fundamental insecurities: it is a field unsure of what it is or what it is to become.[1] These uncertainties are exemplified in common academic discussions

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[1] Ali Farazmand, "The Future of Public Administration Challenges and Opportunities—A Critical Perspective," *Administration & Society* 44, no. 4 (2012): 517.

of the identity crisis in public administration. For example, Morgan and colleagues assert that "Public administration continues to face an 'identity crisis' that has been at the center of the discipline since its inception".[2] In addition, the identity crisis can be framed in the terms of the late 1940s Waldo-Simon debates: is the study of public administration art or science? [3] [4] Other scholars phrase the crisis in terms of legitimacy:

> While the external legitimacy problem – the question of how to theorize bureaucracy as a legitimate part of democracy – has occupied the greatest attention of the public administration theory community during the past several years, it is the internal legitimacy problem – the difficulty of finding an identity acceptable to all associated with the field – that is the more serious issue.[5]

Farazmand believes the past 30 years have exacerbated the identity crisis in that this period has been particularly challenging as public administration has faced multiple transformations that have required redefining its core.[6] In a recent article, Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg suggest that the field may be undergoing another redefinition based in what they term as an "emerging approach". [7] This emerging approach contrasts with prior dominant perspectives in public administration commonly referred to as traditional public administration and New Public Management. This new approach places an emphasis on the concepts of public values, the importance of the role of government in promoting public values, the belief in public management being grounded in service to the public, and the importance of understanding the relationship between public administration and democratic collaborative governance.[8]

Recent surges in research related to the emerging approach represent a contemporary demonstration of the changing nature of the field of public administration. In this essay I suggest that this growth in academic interest presents an opportunity to alleviate the public administration identity crisis by accepting the changing nature of the field as central to public administration identity. Previous shifts in the conceptual grounding of public administration have resulted in adopting dominant flavor-of-the-day perspectives as the identity of public

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[2] Douglas Morgan et al. "Recovering, restoring, and renewing the foundations of American public administration: The contributions of Herbert J. Storing," *Public Administration Review* 70, no. 4 (2010): 622.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Norma M. Riccucci, *Public Administration: Traditions of Inquiry and Philosophies of Knowledge*, Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press (2010): 6-20.

[5] O. C. McSwite, "Postmodernism and public administration's identity crisis," *Public Administration Review* 55, no. 2 (1997): 174.

[6] Farazmand, "The Future of Public Administration Challenges and Opportunities," 517.

[7] John M. Bryson, Barbara C. Crosby, and Laura Bloomberg, "Public value governance: moving beyond traditional public administration and the new public management," *Public Administration Review* 74, no. 4 (2014): 445.

[8] Bryson Crosby, and Bloomberg, "Public value governance", 445.

administration.[9] A prominent example is the widespread acceptance of New Public Management doctrine during the 1980s.[10] [11] In addition, textbooks of public administration that portray the development of the field as segmented into separate "paradigms" would lead readers to believe there is a tacit acceptance of single field-defining perspectives at certain periods in time.[12] Such practices fail to recognize that change and diverse perspectives are characteristic of public administration's identity, and that different perspectives ought to be embraced rather than debated and replaced.[13] Kelley and Dodds state, "to attempt to identify the core essence of Public Administration risks ignoring the evolutionary nature of the field".[14] I suggest that the core essence of public admiration's identity is the evolutionary nature.

The essay is structured into three sections. In the first I provide a brief overview of the centrality of public values to the emerging approach and demonstrate its growing popularity. In the following two sections I review two recent trends in public administration research that are related to the emerging approach and have supported its growing popularity. I provide evidence of how this research has experienced recent popularity, how it is connected to public values, and how calls for continuing both trends in research have been made. The first trend reviewed is research in public participation processes, which furthers an understanding of the public's role in public administration and explores the relationship between citizens and public managers. The second trend reviewed is research on the concept of public service motivation, which focuses on uncovering the motives behind why individuals are driven to work in public service. In the concluding section I propose that these trends, if continued, will legitimize the emerging approach and demonstrate the changing nature of the field, affording an opportunity for scholars to embrace change and diversity of knowledge as central to public administration identity.

What are Public Values?

Emphasizing the importance of understanding public *values* is central to the emerging approach.[15] Not to be confused with public *value*, Nabatichi provides a clear and concise distinction between the two concepts: "…we can think of public value as an appraisal of managerial activities and actions conducted by government agents and officials, and public values as social standards, principles, and ideals to be pursued and upheld by government agents

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[9] Yair Zalmanovitch, "Don't reinvent the wheel: the search for an identity for public administration," International Review of Administrative Sciences 80, no. 4 (2014): 810-11
[10] Christopher Hood, "A public management for all seasons?" Public Administration 69, no. 1 (1991): 3-4.
[11] Eran Vigoda, "Rethinking the identity of public administration: Interdisciplinary reflections and thoughts on managerial reconstruction," *Public Administration & Management* 8, no. 1 (2003): 13.
[12] Riccucci, *Public Administration*, 24.
[13] Ibid., 18-20.
[14] Josie Kelly and Anneliese Dodds, "Public administration in an age of austerity: The future of the discipline," *Public Policy and Administration* 27, no. 3 (2012): 201.
[15] Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg, "Public value governance", 452-54

and officials."[16]

Public values have been a topic of multidisciplinary interest since 1969, however the topic received increased attention recently, and particularly in public administration literature.[17] For example, public values served as the topic of an academic symposium in the 2015 January issue of *The American Review of Public Administration*, one of the top public administration journals in the field. As part of that symposium, a comprehensive search of scholarly literature between 1945 and 2012 revealed that 397 academic publications discuss public values, with over 60% of those publications appearing between 2000 and 2012.[18] The importance of public values to public administration is clear: public managers, who are charged with carrying out the common will of the people, are regularly faced with questions on which public values ought to take precedent when addressing particular public issues; and they are also faced with how to settle value conflicts in the process.[19] While public managers are deeply entwined with public values, it is important to note that private citizens also have an important role in shaping a society's public values.[20]

The section reviews the role of citizens in government through public participation. In addition to public values, both the concepts of public participation and public service motivation, reviewed in the second subsequent section, are central to the emerging approach. In these next two sections I demonstrate the importance of these growing bodies of literature to further establish the emerging approach as a potentially new dominant perspective.

The Role of the Public in Public Administration

As noted earlier, the emerging approach places a strong emphasis on collaborative governance, which is directly related to the idea of public participation. Research in public participation provides a means to clarify and expand the understanding of the public's role in public administration. Public participation is not a new concept in public administration[21] but continues to remain a thriving area of research.[22] Despite enduring challenges associated with enacting

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[16] Tina Nabatchi, "Four frames for understanding public values in administration and governance," *Article Presented at the Public Value Consortium Biennial Workshop 2012,* University of Illinois at Chicago, June 3-5, 2012.

[17] Zeger Van der Wal, Tina Nabatchi, and Gjalt De Graaf, "From galaxies to universe: A cross-disciplinary review and analysis of public values publications from 1969 to 2012," *The American Review of Public Administration* 45, no. 1 (2015).

[18] Ibid., 15-18.

[19] Tina Nabatchi, "Putting the "public" back in public values research" *Public Administration Review* 72, no. 5 (2012): 699-700.

[20] Torben Beck Jørgensen and Barry Bozeman, "Public values an inventory," *Administration & Society* 39, no. 3 (2007): 373.

[21] Sherry R. Arnstein, "A ladder of citizen participation." *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35, no. 4 (1969).

[22] Nancy Roberts, *The Age of Direct Citizen Participation,* Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 2008.

public participation,[23] its importance to the field is evidenced by Nabatchi, Goerdel, and Peffer who suggest that opening public space to increase citizen participation and offering the opportunity to debate social questions with government officials will help public administration to navigate contemporary "dark times" in society.[24] Today's public managers are serving in a unique position that affords them the opportunity to engage citizens and reinvigorate public spaces by designing genuine public participation processes.

Much research involving public participation in public administration has attempted to assist practitioners in designing sincere public participation processes by identifying participation typologies based on levels of citizen involvement and creating participation design guidelines. Typologies play an important part in identifying practices that may appear as effective public participation but in actuality do not capture genuine citizen feedback. Such typologies date back to the late 1960s, with Arnstein's hierarchical "Ladder of Citizen Participation" being frequently cited.[25] She notes that not all citizen participation is equal; participation at the top of the ladder fosters the redistribution of power (e.g., partnership), while other types are simply "empty rituals."[26]

Similar to Arnstein but nearly 40 years later, Cooper, Bryer, and Meek propose a typology of five different public engagement strategies based on varying levels of citizen involvement.[27] The strategies are evaluated on how well they maximize six variables such as government trust in citizens and vice versa, that contribute to a citizen-centered collaborative public management approach.[28] They note the shortcomings of adversarial approaches and instead suggest that the most efficient strategies are deliberative approaches. These approaches are those that offer the opportunity for full discussion and deliberation of issues and ideas between officials and a wide array of citizens.[29] It is of note that the partnering and deliberative approaches espoused by Arnstein, Cooper, and their colleagues demonstrate long-held beliefs that support the emerging approach, which suggests perceiving citizens as "…quite capable of engaging in deliberative problem solving that allow them to develop a public spiritedness".[30]

In addition to the identification of participation typologies, there has been recent research on the creation of participation design guidelines. This work focuses on synthesizing research and practice to provide practitioners with practical tools to assist them with design, management,

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[23] Archon Fung, "Putting the Public Back into Governance: The Challenges of Citizen Participation and Its Future," *Public Administration Review* 75, no. 4 (2015): 8-9.

[24] Tina Nabatchi, Holly T. Goerdel, and Shelly Peffer, "Public administration in dark times: Some questions for the future of the field," *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 21, no. suppl 1 (2011): i33.

[25] Arnstein, "A ladder of citizen participation", 216-24.

[26] Ibid., 216.

[27] Terry L. Cooper, Thomas A. Bryer, and Jack W. Meek, "Citizen-centered collaborative public management," *Public Administration Review* 66, no. s1 (2006): 76-88.

[28] Ibid., 79.

[29] Ibid., 79-83.

[30] Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg, "Public value governance", 447.

evaluation, and redesign of participation.[31] While seemingly universal guidelines may help practitioners to accomplish desired participation outcomes, participation design is complex and should be based in context-specific factors.[32] The importance of context is emphasized by Thomas who suggests that contemporary public managers need to interact with the public in a manner based on the different roles that the public may hold in various situations.[33] Interacting with the public as customers (i.e., when the public is seeking public services), partners (i.e., when the public assists the government in carrying out public services), or citizens (i.e., when the public is engaged in deliberation regarding the direction of government) requires public managers shape their response based on the situation.[34] For example, responding to the public as customer demands responsiveness, while working with the public as partner demands clarity in direction.[35]

Research in participation design guidelines has demonstrated how public participation has conceptual overlaps with public values research. For example, Nabatachi suggests that through designing participation public managers have the potential to identify and understand public values that are relevant to specific public policy issues, as well as reconcile the frequent conflicts in public values that occur.[36] Considering public participation as a means to maximize practitioners' ability to identify and understand public values directly bridges public values and public participation research.[37] With this in mind, Nabatchi provides design guidelines for eight design elements of participation, such as communication mode and participant selection.[38] In sum, she suggests that participation will best assist practitioners in value-based policy conflicts when such processes are "… designed to be interest based, use deliberative communication in a small table format with trained facilitators, have moderate to high levels of shared decision authority, provide informational materials, select participants from among members of the broader public, use recruitment strategies that minimize participation bias, and occur in more than one session."[39]

Participation typologies that illustrate authentic participation and the design guidelines that detail how practitioners may craft such processes provide a strong research foundation. However, there is much left to accomplish in participation research, particularly in applied public administration settings, leaving a promising future.[40] Nabatchi suggests that the trend in participation research will continue and claims that by 2020 public administration scholars will better understand the where, when, why, and how of designing and implementing public participation that benefits

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[31] John M. Bryson et al., "Designing public participation processes," *Public Administration Review* 73, no. 1 (2013): 24.

[32] Ibid., 31.

[33] John Clayton Thomas, "Citizen, customer, partner: Rethinking the place of the public in public management," *Public Administration Review* 73, no. 6 (2013): 786-87.

[34] Ibid., 789-94.

[35] Ibid., 789-94.

[36] Tina Nabatchi, "Putting the "public" back in public values research", 699.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid., 700-01.

[39] Ibid., 706.

[40] Fung, "Putting the Public Back into Governance," 9.

both citizens and government.[41] If Nabatchi's claims are true, then such an increase in our understanding of participation's effectiveness will likely encourage public managers to embrace democratic collaborative governance, which is a hallmark of the emerging approach.

The Motivation to Serve the Public

Public administration research based in "…a belief in the importance of public management broadly conceived and of service to and for the public" also contributes to substantiating the emerging approach.[42] For example, research that explores public service motivation (PSM) has received considerable attention since the concept was established in 1990.[43] Serving as evidence of the prominence of the concept, the September/October 2015 issue of *Public Administration Review* contained an anniversary symposium dedicated specifically to PSM research. In that symposium, Bozeman and Su demonstrate the growth of interest in PSM, particularly within the past few years.[44] They report on a search through three comprehensive bibliographic databases for the occurrence of "public service motivation", "Public Service Motivation", or "PSM" in the title of peer-reviewed journal articles, noting that they also briefly scanned the articles to eliminate any from their count that focused on topics that shared the same PSM acronym (e.g., prostate-specific membrane).[45] Of note from their findings is that between the years 1995 and 2005 the annual count of articles did not exceed four; but in 2006 the count doubled to eight and continued to grow with counts in 2010 and 2011 of twenty articles and in 2012 with twenty-one.[46]

Perry and Wise provide the seminal definition of PPSM as "an individual's predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions and organizations."[47] Twenty years after that publication, Perry, Hondeghem, and Wise determine that subsequent research, both within and outside public administration, has generally supported the original PSM propositions: PSM drives individuals to join public organizations; PSM is positively related to individual performance in public organization; and organizations which employ individuals who have high levels of PSM will not have to resort to utilitarian incentives in order to sustain effective individual performance.[48] Despite this support, they emphasize that further research on PSM is warranted due to several shortcomings, including the problematic reliance on self-reported measures of performance and the broader-than-anticipated relationships between PSM,

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[41] Tina Nabatchi, "The (re) discovery of the public in public administration," *Public Administration Review* 70, no. s1 (2010): s310.

[42] Bryson Crosby, and Bloomberg, "Public value governance", 445.

[43] James L. Perry, and Lois Recascino Wise, "The motivational bases of public service," *Public Administration Review* 50, no. 3 (1990).

[44] Barry Bozeman, and Xuhong Su, "Public service motivation concepts and theory: A critique," *Public Administration Review* 75, no. 5 (2015): 700-01.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Perry and Wise, "The motivational bases of public service," 368.

[48] Perry, James L., Annie Hondeghem, and Lois Recascino Wise. "Revisiting the motivational bases of public service: Twenty years of research and an agenda for the future." *Public administration review* 70, no. 5 (2010): 681-690.

performance, and incentives.[49]

There are conceptual similarities between PSM and public values. For example, both are based in the belief that behavior in public administration is not the result of pure self-interest. Andersen and colleagues further demonstrate the similarity between PSM and public values by empirically correlating public values with PSM dimensions.[50] Their findings include that the PSM dimension of "commitment to the public interest" is most strongly associated with the public value indices of rule abidance, professionalism, and the public at large.[51] In addition, they suggest that a strong correlation exists between the PSM dimension of attraction to policy making and the value index of balancing interests.[52] Combined work in public values and PSM may lead to additional practical applications. It may be possible to identify public administration contexts that have direction (i.e., public values) but no energy (i.e., PSM), or vice versa.[53]

Although much has been accomplished in research on PSM, there is a need for further study to strengthen the concept.[54] Bozeman and Su demonstrate conceptual deficits such as the need to reach consensus on a clear definition of PSM (they present 23 different descriptions of PSM) and the need to differentiate PSM from other similar concepts such as general service motivation, altruism, and prosocial motives.[55] They suggest that adopting conceptualizations that maintain a public-focused approach will be the best solution to both maintaining definitional clarity and uniqueness; however such conceptualizations require additional specification in regards to defining "public". They conclude that to advance PSM as a valuable explanatory concept conceptual refinements are needed along with an ability to connect PSM to behaviors and not solely attitudes.[56]

Discussion

The brief literature review presented here on concepts related to the emerging approach, public values, public participation, and PSM, demonstrates the increasing attention being devoted to the emerging approach. While not new, the emerging approach "reemphasizes and brings to the fore value-related concerns of previous eras that were always present but not dominant", particularly "values associated with democracy" and the need for better understanding of the relationship between public administration and public values.[57] Continued research related to concepts characteristic of the emerging approach will contribute to the

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[49] Perry, James L., Annie Hondeghem, and Lois Recascino Wise. "Revisiting the motivational bases of public service: Twenty years of research and an agenda for the future."

[50] Lotte Bøgh Andersen et al., "Public values and public service motivation conceptual and empirical relationships." *The American Review of Public Administration* 43, no. 3 (2013): 297-301.

[51] Ibid., 302.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Ibid., 304.

[54] Bozeman and Su, "Public service motivation concepts and theory," 700-10.

[55] Ibid., 702-04.

[56] Ibid., 707.

[57] Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg, "Public value governance", 445.

legitimization of the approach within public administration and help to establish it as a dominant perspective in the field.

As discussed earlier in the essay, public administration suffers from a self-imposed identity crisis, in part by adopting the dominant flavor-of-the-day perspective as the identity of the field. The growth of interest in a new perspective presents the potential to exacerbate the identity crisis. On the other hand, the emergence of a perspective that contrasts with previous perspectives in public administration illustrates the potential diversity of the field. Rather than perceiving this occurrence as an exacerbation of the public administration identity crisis, the field would benefit from defining public administration's identity as ever-changing and multifaceted[58] [59] By doing so the field may be able to move beyond unproductive debates about which past perspective should define the field and instead embrace the diversity in perspectives on public administration.. Embracing diverse perspectives presents an opportunity for uncovering innovative ideas and practices that may help solve complex public problems. Such valuable ideas may not even come to light when remaining constrained by a single perspective.

This argument is similar to Riccucci's, who also supports embracing diversity within public administration from an epistemological standpoint.[60] She suggests that diversity in research approaches is key to the study of public administration, particularly as an applied field of study.[61] She notes that reliance on strict positivistic research approaches neglects a variety of other research approaches, such as interpretivism, that have proven their value for building knowledge about public administration.[62]

Zalmanovitch offers a possible way to incorporate the diversity in conceptual grounding and epistemological approaches into a unified conception of public administration identity.[63] He suggests that the identity of the field lies in understanding how the three pillars of public administration – politics, management, and legality – coexist and interact at different periods in time.[64] He proposes that the historical longitudinal analysis of the field will help illustrate the temporary interactions, coexistences, and imbalances among the pillars at different periods in history.[65] He views cyclical change as a natural process for the field.[66] Gaining an understanding of the catalysts for change, the circumstances around why new configurations of the three pillars emerge and why they inevitably fade, will provide insight into a public administration identity.[67] The path suggested by Zalamanovitch toward understanding public administration identity will require in-depth analysis of the knowledge accumulation process that has occurred through time,

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[58] Kelly and Dodds, "Public administration in an age of austerity", 201.

[59] Riccucci, *Public Administration*, 1-3.

[60] Ibid., 46-51.

[61] Ibid., 43.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Zalmanovitch, "Don't reinvent the wheel," 810-13.

[64] Ibid., 813.

[65] Ibid., 815-17.

[66] Ibid., 816.

[67] Ibid. 817-18.

as evidenced in the scholarly work on public administration.[68]

The emerging approach and the related concepts that are detailed in the literature reviewed in this essay present a contemporary example of a shift in the configuration of the three pillars. While New Public Management was imbalanced toward managerialism, the emerging approach appears to be shifting the balance to the political and legal pillars. This period presents public administration scholars with the opportunity to embrace change as central to public administration identity. Accepting this argument requires recognition of at least three conditions: that any shift is inevitably temporary due to factors that are exogenous to the field;[69] that any shift will not lead to the uncovering of a new and improved public administration identity, and that debating the dominance of the new configuration over previous configurations does not further our understanding of the field.[70] If public administration scholars are able to accept these conditions, we may be able to move beyond the debates on dominant public administration perspectives and focus efforts on a different discussion; one that determines how to embrace diverse knowledge from various perspectives in order to draw upon the proven and useful aspects of these perspectives to address the complex public problems of our modern society.

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[68] Zalmanovitch, "Don't reinvent the wheel," 820-21.

[69] Ibid., 819.

[70] Riccucci, *Public Administration,* 18-19.

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